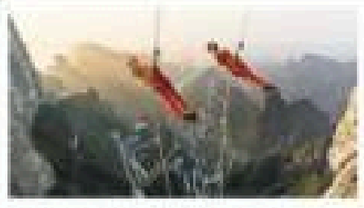

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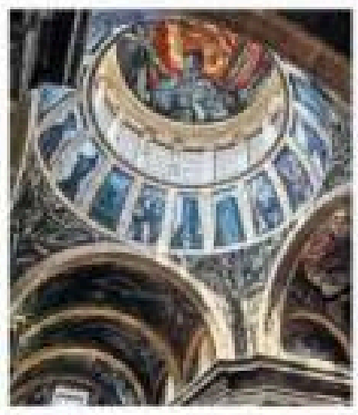

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The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL EDITION | SATURDAY-SUNDAY, MARCH 1-2, 2025

Don't forget where Musk comes from

William Shoki

OPINION

CAPE TOWN Elon Musk is everywhere. He is firing federal employees, gaining access to important government data, jogging into the Oval Office, appearing on Fox News alongside President Trump and even attending a White House cabinet meeting. For some, his rampage through the institutions of the American state augurs a replacement by private interests; for others, it amounts to a Big Tech takeover. For many looking on, it's above all a baffling bemusance at the heart of power. However one understands Mr. Musk's role in the Trump administration, it has cemented his reputation as one of the most powerful people on the planet.

The mogul's worldview is deeply rooted in his rearing in apartheid South Africa.

But discussion of Mr. Musk, especially in the United States, often misses something: He is a white South African, part of a demographic that for centuries sat atop a racial hierarchy maintained by violent colonial rule. That history matters. For all the attempts to describe Mr. Musk as a self-made genius or a dispassionate technocrat, he is in fact a distinctly ideological figure, one whose worldview is inseparable from rearing in apartheid South Africa. More than just an eccentric billionaire, Mr. Musk represents an unresolved question: What happens when settler rule fails but settlers remain? That's what is playing out in America today.

Born in Pretoria in 1971, Mr. Musk had an upbringing typical of the white South African elite. The family was wealthy, despite his parents divorcing when he was young, its economic standing shaped by a system designed to assist whites. Mr. Musk doesn't appear to have enjoyed his private education — there are stories of bullying and loneliness — but he still benefited from the advantages it conferred. Though his father, an engineer, was for a time a member of the anti-apartheid Progressive Party, there is little evidence Mr. Musk inherited his political convictions. Like many white South

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The New York Times publishes opinion from a wide range of perspectives in hopes of promoting constructive debate about consequential questions.

Despite efforts to rescue thousands from fraud compounds in Myanmar, many of which are visible from the Thai side of the country's border, the centers proliferate unchecked.

Scam factory of the world

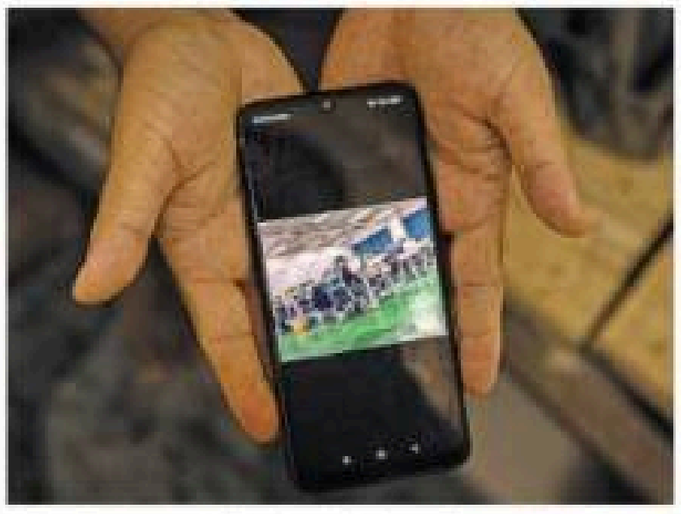
MAE SOT, THAILAND

Trafficking victims peddle fraud from crime hubs on Myanmar's lawless border

BY HANNAH BEECH

There are usually no international flights out of the airport in Mae Sot, a town on Thailand's border with Myanmar. But in recent days, hundreds of people here boarded direct flights back home to China. They had been rescued from Myanmar, where they had been ensnared in a 21st-century scourge — online scam mills that have used forced labor to bilk tens of billions of dollars out of victims worldwide.

The chartered flights were part of a multinational effort that followed the trafficking in January of a Chinese actor



A photo of the interior of a fraud center in Myanmar displayed by Ko Min, a member of an armed group that has a stake in one of the largest crime cities.

to work in a fraud center, which scared off Chinese tourists from visiting Thailand. The rescue missions, coordinated by officials in Thailand, Myanmar and China, were pitched as a body blow to this industry of grift.

But even as the planes headed north, construction workers in these scam centers — modern tower blocks within sight of the Thai side of the frontier — continued to weld and hammer into the night, brazenly building new warehouses dedicated to crime. Fraudsters confined to rooms with barred windows kept cajoling money out of lonely hearts and eager investors in the United States, China and beyond.

Following a military coup in Myanmar in 2021 and an ensuing civil war, the country's border with Thailand has exploded into one of the most lawless and lucrative places on earth. Chinese criminal syndicates have moved in, making deals with rival factions to turn ruin-

MYANMAR, PAGE 4

Some in E.U. fear Trump intends to destroy bloc

BERLIN

His tariff threats, disdain for NATO and embrace of far right alarm U.S. allies

BY STEVEN ERLANGER

During his first term in office, President Trump described the European Union "as a foe," established "to hurt the United States on trade."

He repeated the charge at a cabinet meeting on Wednesday, but in more vulgar terms: "The European Union was formed in order to screw the United States. That's the purpose of it, and they've done a good job of it."

Then he said he was preparing to hit Europe with 25 percent tariffs on cars and other goods.

After Mr. Trump's embrace of Russia and his warnings that Europe had better fend for itself, the president's latest attack added to the increasing view of European leaders and analysts that he and his team of loyalists consider America's traditional allies in Europe to be adversaries, not just on trade, but on nearly everything.

Some officials and analysts see the Trump administration as merely indifferent to Europe; others see open hostility. But there is a common view that the fundamental relationship has changed and that America is a less reliable and predictable ally.

Mr. Trump has rebuffed NATO and aligned himself with the longstanding, principal threat to the alliance: Russia. Vice President JD Vance has attacked European democracy while calling for the door to be opened to far-right parties. Elon Musk, the billionaire Trump aide, has heaped contempt on European leaders and openly endorsed an extremist party in Germany.

Equally shocking to European leaders, the United States refused this past week at the United Nations to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It instead broke from its allies and voted with Russia, Belarus and North Korea, all authoritarian governments.

European leaders are scrambling to assess and mitigate the damage. The prime minister of Britain, Keir Starmer, arrived at the White House on Thursday — the second such visit in a week, after President Emmanuel Macron of France — still hoping to persuade Mr. Trump not to abandon Ukraine and to remain

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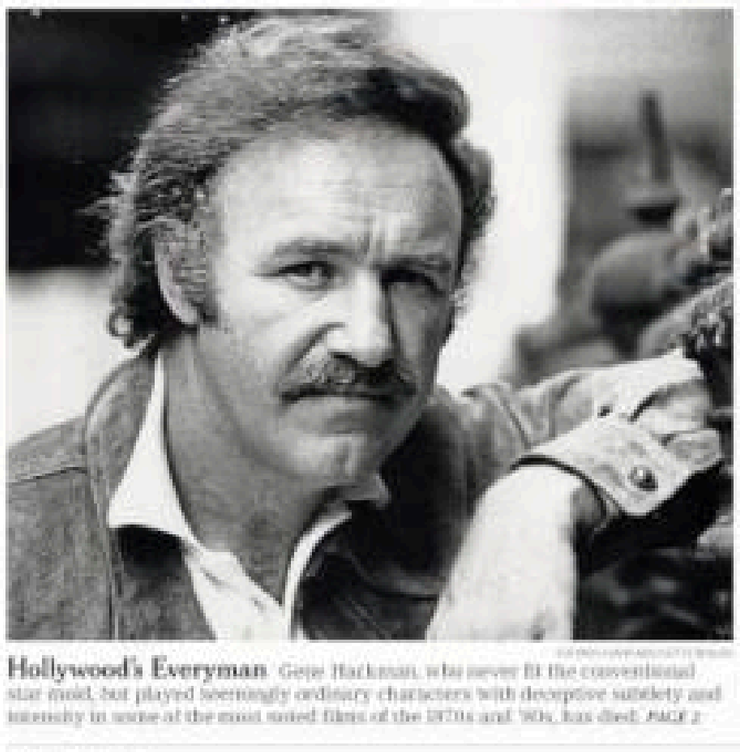


Hollywood's Everyman Gene Hackman, who never fit the conventional star mold, but played seemingly ordinary characters with deceptive subtlety and intensity in some of the most noted films of the 1970s and '80s, has died. PAGE 2

The female body, as seen through the female gaze

Thanks to more women making films, a new kind of woman is on our screens

BY MANOHLA DARGIS

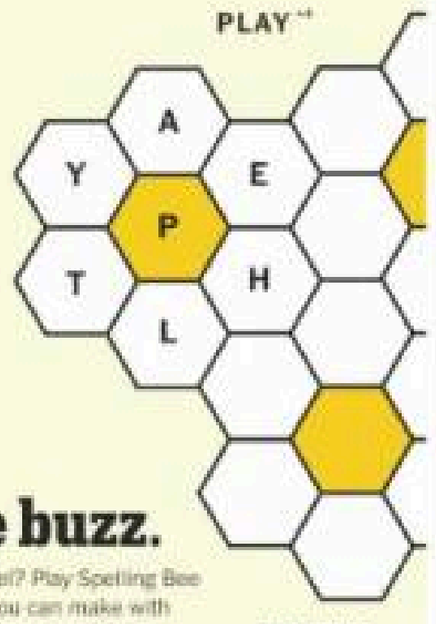
Movies contain a multitude of bodies in different sizes, colors and muscle tones, bodies that are lean, bulky, parched, surgically altered. Talking about them, though, especially women's bodies, can be understandably fraught. For some observers, writing about them is unnecessary and objectifying, even if a lot of other people — politicians, activists, influencers, Supreme Court justices — can't stop talking about them. "We're always talking about the feminine condition and the role of women," the filmmaker Agnès Varda once said. "But I want to talk about the woman's body, about our bodies." I want to talk about them, too.

That's because some of the most memorable movies that I've seen lately are from female filmmakers who are also clearly thinking about women's bodies and helping expand what kinds of women we are seeing onscreen. One such movie I keep returning to is Gia Coppola's "The Last Showgirl," a recently released drama set on the frayed edges of Las Vegas. In a scene that keeps playing in my head, a cocktail waitress, Annette — played by a soulful Jamie Lee Curtis — climbs atop a small platform in the casino where she works and begins dancing. As slot machines ping around her, she slowly gyrates to the 1980s hit "Total Eclipse of the Heart." Annette looks as if she's in her own world. She looks glorious.

Curtis, who's 66, has said the scene shows the "degradation of women at the end of their lives," adding that "nobody cares." Scarcely any casino patrons glance at Annette as she dances, true.

MOVIES, PAGE 2

PLAY



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